

JOURNEY TO THE FALASHAS

Ethiopia's Black Jews

SIMON D. MESSING

HALF a century ago, Professor Jacques Faitlovitch, a young Jewish scholar from Paris, startled Jewish communities throughout Europe by presenting them with letters from the priests of the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia. Until then, except for a few scholars, no one in the Western world had been aware of the tens of thousands of Black Jews of Ethiopia, who claimed a history of more than two thousand years in their country.

Very little research has been undertaken since Dr. Faitlovitch's original investigations, and therefore the early history of the Falashas is still clothed in darkness. They know no Hebrew, reading the Bible in Geez, a Semitic language spoken in northern Ethiopia until the 13th century C.E. They had not heard of the Talmud or of the Babylonian captivity until Dr. Faitlovitch told his Falasha students about them. How they came to profess Judaism in the first place, no one knows. The most plausible theory holds that Jews from across the Red Sea had a colony in the ancient Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum, just before that kingdom was converted to Coptic Christianity in the 4th century C.E. "Falasha" means "exile," and it may be that some Ethiopianized descendants of the Jewish colony refused to accept Christianity and were exiled to the western escarpment of Ethiopia's highland plateau.

According to the Coptic Ethiopian chronicles, an Agau-speaking Falasha queen named Judith ruled an independent state in the area

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a thousand years ago. Later, the chronicles record, Coptic armies broke up this domain and the Falasha remnant retreated to the mountainous highlands north and west of Lake Tana, in the northwestern corner of Ethiopia where the Blue Nile originates. There they settled and successfully resisted conversion, until in the 1860's Protestant missionaries from the London Society for the Conversion of the Jews sought them out and won over thousands in the province of Dembea, just above Lake Tana. It was to stem this tide that Dr. Faitlovitch, after his first visit to the Falashas in 1904, traveled to all the major Jewish communities in the Western world to seek help for his Hebrew and religious school to be established in Addis Ababa.

IT is not surprising that as a student of anthropology specializing in the Biblical lands of the Middle East and Africa, I should have become interested in Ethiopia. When the time came to do field work for my doctorate, my professors at the University of Pennsylvania recommended a visit to the Coptic Christian Amharas of Ethiopia. I knew the Falashas lived in the same general area and functioned as an essential caste in the life of the Amharas, and I intended to acquaint myself with both groups. For twelve hours daily, in the sweltering summer of 1953, I studied the Amharic language, both written and oral, and I read every book on Ethiopia I could lay hands on.

Dr. Faitlovitch, then in retirement in Israel, wrote me that he was becoming greatly concerned about the increasing assimilation of the Falashas to the Coptic Christians. I looked forward to meeting some of the graduates of his school—especially those few whom he had taken for further education to Germany and France. They would be middle-aged by now, and some of them, I had learned, were occupying high positions in the Ethiopian government. Dr. Faitlovitch had hoped that they would become Orthodox Jews by Western

standards and serve as teachers and religious leaders in their home villages. But the Ethiopian government had been only too happy to employ them, when it returned after the Italian occupation, in the newly established ministries in Addis Ababa. The Graziani massacre during the Italo-Ethiopian war had left extremely few educated persons alive.

BECAUSE cross-county travel on muleback is well-nigh impossible during the rainy season in Ethiopia, I planned to arrive after its end. One can fly to Addis Ababa from Cairo, a matter of ten hours, or travel on the single-track railway from the Red Sea, a trip of two days. I left Cairo by plane.

In Addis Ababa, on the way to my hotel, I saw men and women on the streets with surprisingly Mediterranean features. They wore the *shamma*, a loose, toga-like garment that is draped differently for different occasions. I saw two Ethiopian policemen walking hand in hand. A barefoot, bearded Coptic priest, wearing a white turban, deftly pulled out from under his *shamma* a large brass cross for a young Ethiopian in Western dress to kiss, which he did several times with quick and hearty devotion while my taxi waited for a traffic light to change.

The first night at my hotel I was stricken with dysentery, probably because I had ignored the warning not to drink unboiled water. But I was cheered by a visit from the president of the newly founded College of Addis Ababa, to whom I had a letter of introduction. He was a French-Canadian Jesuit, like many others on the faculty of this non-sectarian college. The college librarian had organized an Ethnology Society, and the president told me that they would be glad to have me come along on field trips. He hoped that I would help to make the Society's work more scientific.

This kind gentleman was to prove extremely helpful. A visa to Ethiopia entitles one only to visit the capital. Travel in the provinces requires a permit from the Ministry of the Interior. This is issued only upon a request to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs made through some other ministry. In my case, I was introduced by the college president to the Vice Minister of Education (Emperor Haile Selassie himself is Minister of Education), who talked to me in French about my plans for work, and instructed his department to issue me a "Letter of Purpose" in Amharic.

IN THE six weeks before my permit was issued, I worked with the students of the Ethnology Society. We went on several field trips, one of which took us over 120 kilometers of pebbly dirt road to the holiest of Ethiopian Coptic monasteries, Debra Libanos, where we watched mass being celebrated at dawn.

One morning back at the hotel, a new guest appeared for breakfast, a trim-bearded European wearing a black skullcap. He began speaking animated Hebrew to a swarthy table-mate. The European was Rav Shmuel. He had been sent by the Jewish Agency of Israel to found a Hebrew school for the Falashas in Asmara, Eritrea (the latter territory had been federated with Ethiopia in 1952), and was passing through Addis Ababa on a semi-official visit. His companion was a Jew from Aden who had lived in Tel Aviv, where he had failed in his attempt to set up a sort of Barnum & Bailey circus. Now he had joined a relative in Addis Ababa, likewise a native of Aden, who exported Ethiopian coffee and sun-dried cattle hides.

Rav Shmuel told me that he had not tried to obtain a permit to enter the province of Begemdir, where the Falashas lived; instead, his assistant, a Falasha who was a former student of Dr. Faitlovitch and had studied in Frankfurt-on-the-Main in the 1920's, had gone on a visit to his relatives in the mud-hut villages of the hilly plateau with the intention of bringing back with him a half-dozen Falasha priests for a two months' initial course in Jewish history, Rabbinic law, and the Hebrew alphabet at Rav Shmuel's school. He also intended to bring back a dozen boys and a few girls, over the age of twelve, and a woman to take care of them. The young students would pursue a more extended course of study than the priests, who would be returning home relatively soon. Rav Shmuel's assistant was the only student of Dr. Faitlovitch's who had been willing to give up his job with the Ethiopian government for this "reclamation" work.

Through the Adenite, I was promised an early introduction to a Falasha official in the Ethiopian government's Ministry of Finance, who would send a letter to the Falashas in Gondar, the capital of the province of Begemdir, announcing my arrival.

My permit to travel outside Addis Ababa came through from the Ministry of the Interior. As I was on the point of leaving

for Gondar, I heard that the American ambassador was about to pay an official visit to the same place. A Lutheran minister in Minnesota for twenty-two years, he wanted to observe the Coptic Christmas celebration in Gondar, where, he had been told, the old customs were still kept. He was delighted to have me come with him, since he was traveling alone.

We flew straight north to Gondar on a cargo plane, sitting in bucket seats. One young passenger in Western dress was carrying a copy of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* stuffed full of letters in airmail envelopes. He seemed to know who I was and identified himself as a Falasha student on a vacation trip home to Gondar. He told me that among his letters was the one from the Falasha official in the Ministry of Finance announcing my impending visit to the Falasha communities.

Gondar has a population of about 20,000, among whom are ten Europeans. Three-hundred-year-old castles built in the style of the Portuguese (who once had a foothold here) loomed over its mud huts. We visited schools, a hospital, monasteries. The British headmistress of the girls' elementary school showed us a huge clay pot made by a Falasha woman. She told us that the Falashas in the back country supplied their fellow Ethiopians with pottery, plow points, and wooden saddles. Non-agricultural manual labor, even if skilled, is despised by the northern Ethiopian, and smithcraft is thought to be closely connected with black magic (as it was believed to be in various parts of the Middle East and Europe when metal-working was introduced). As a result, the Falashas have a virtual monopoly on certain handicrafts in their area.

A FEW days after the Ambassador had returned to Addis Ababa, I visited my first Falasha village, Wolleqa, in the company of a middle-aged German Jew who was one of the two European doctors at the Ethiopian government hospital in Gondar. Very few Falashas live in Gondar. They prefer their hill villages, where they can be by themselves; they consider the town Falashas unobservant and polluted and do not allow them to enter their *mesgid* (synagogue) or to eat with them. But in Wolleqa, which is not in the hills, the old *attenqunye*, or "touch-me-not" laws, were no longer observed. We drove over a rocky road, laid down by the Italians, in the doctor's new Volkswagen,

accompanied by his wife and my Falasha friend of the plane, who served as guide.

We left at the hottest time of day, and it was a relief at last to see Wolleqa's old *mesgid*. On a slight rise across the recently harvested fields, a hundred yards off the road, stood a round stone hut with a corrugated iron roof. Surrounding it were a half-dozen thatched mud huts, all that were left of the populous village Dr. Faitlovitch had described a half century ago. Most of the inhabitants had moved away to the hill country when the Italians began building the road. They had felt too exposed.

The first person to come out of one of the huts as we left the car and started across the fields was a fifteen-year-old boy. He was a fifth-grade student, the only Wolleqa Falasha attending the school in Gondar, and was now at home on vacation. Our guide introduced us in Amharic, and we were warmly received. The boy's father left off his weaving, his mother her pottery-making, and his elder brother came from the smithy where he had been fashioning a plow point. They regarded us with deep interest. The father, a bearded elder, drew himself to full height, pulled his toga down from his nose, and in formal tones invoked the traditional blessing in Geez for the occasion: "Thanks be to *Egziabher Amlak* [Owner of the World—God] who has brought our brothers from across the big water." He showed us the harvest from his rented land. (It is extremely rare for Falashas to own land; they rent it from the Coptic parish church, the feudal landlord, or, in some cases, a land-owning peasant family.) The mounds of grain, not yet threshed, were covered with thornbushes for protection against baboons and birds.

The whole village soon gathered around us. "The Falashas don't look any different from other Ethiopians in this area!" the doctor's wife exclaimed. They wrapped the *shamma* like the others, the men wore the same tight white jodhpurs underneath, and the women the same long, coarse cotton dresses. Except for an occasional pair of sandals, none wore shoes. But on closer inspection, I noticed that the Falashas did not wear the *matab*, the plain blue neck cord which identifies the Coptic Christian. And the women, in addition to the leather amulets common to all Ethiopians, had long necklaces made of bright bits of metal.

At the bottom of the hill, on the side away

from the road, I noticed a very small hut surrounded by a circle of low rocks. An elder told me that this was the hut which the women of the village used at childbirth and during menstrual periods. In some of the more tradition-bound villages, every family has one of its own, and in some villages it is even customary to put up a simple lean-to and burn it down after each use. Among the town Falashas, such huts have fallen into disuse. The circle of rocks indicated the point beyond which no man could go. The woman's children may visit her and other women may come to bring food. The huts are near running water so that the women can wash themselves and their clothing before returning to their homes.

We were invited into our host's hut for black coffee, which had just been roasted, pounded, and boiled for us. We had to stoop a bit to enter, but the concave ceiling reached a height of about fifteen feet at the center. The parents' bed consisted of a wooden framework interlaced with sun-dried strips of oxhide, and a clean straw mat on top of it. Sheepskins served as covers. The children slept on shelves of hard clay next to the walls; these were used as benches during the day. As honored guests we were offered sheepskins to cushion the bench, but I had already learned that these skins were a favorite abode of fleas, and that the better part of comfort was to do without them.

While the coffee was being brewed in the crude stone fireplace in the center of the hut, we were offered *talla*, a slightly fermented barley beer. Although it is insulting to refuse a drink, I preferred to wait for the coffee—and thus avoid exposure to the amoebic dysentery I knew was rampant in this area. The water for this "beer" had very likely been taken from the sluggish river only that day.

Our host told us that the *Orit* (the Geez version of the Torah) was their law. There were no *kahnat* (priests) here, but a *kahen* came from one of the distant villages once a month, or when someone died, or for a circumcision. This particular family was willing to eat at the same table with a Coptic Christian, but would not eat meat killed by Christians because in the process of slaughtering the Christians invoke the formula, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." To find wives, the young men go to distant Falasha villages. In Wolleqa, the Falashas still do not intermarry, although in Gondar some of them have taken Muslim or Coptic wives.

MY FIRST encounter with the hill Falashas came in Gondar on the day of Timqat, the Ethiopian Coptic Epiphany, while I was watching the rites outside a church. As the procession returned from ceremonies at the water's edge, led by priests bearing silk-wrapped tablets on their heads, I noticed two dignified figures standing to one side, apart from each other as well as from the crowd. One was the bearded, turbaned *Qadi*, chief of the Ethiopian Muslims of Gondar. The other, to whom I was introduced by one of my Gondar Falasha acquaintances, was the chief priest of the largest Falasha village in the back country. Like the *Qadi*, he had come to pay the respects of his people on this holiest of Christian days. He invited me to visit his village soon.

The Anglo-Indian headmaster of one of the Gondar elementary schools assigned one of his pupils to guide me to the Christian and Falasha villages in the nearby hill country. A twenty-year-old Amhara Copt, Ayannew had had seven grades of elementary school which included four years of English. But he had "flunked out" in his eighth grade and therefore could not go on to Addis Ababa to continue his education. He was pleased at this opportunity to ride about the country on a mule and improve his English at the same time. He was delighted also by my promise to provide him, in addition to his fee, with sandals and a hat, two important items of prestige that would impress both his girl friends and the bearded elders.

He turned out to be a frank and unusually well-informed companion and guide, while still sharing the traditional viewpoint and values of the Coptic Amharas. His father was a local *wogasha*, a native "surgeon" and herbologist, and Ayannew was therefore known far and wide. The Falasha village within easiest mule-back distance was one of the hamlets of Abba Antonyos, where the Christian villages were located on one hill and the Falasha on another, leaving the valley free for cultivation of cereal crops and for pasture. All the land was owned by the local Coptic church.

Ayannew, who had never been in a Falasha hamlet, warned me to address its inhabitants only as "Israelists" because they might feel insulted if called Falashas or *kayla* (ironsmiths). He described them as being fierce and dangerous, and said that they were a people cursed by God for having rejected Jesus and the Virgin Mary. But, he conceded, they made the best pottery and plows. He could not understand

how a people cursed by God could be so talented.

First we visited the Christian huts, then went across the valley and climbed the hill to the Falashas. We stopped at the outer fence of the hamlet and, in keeping with local etiquette, called for the menfolk. When the men are away in the fields and only women are present, it is considered discourteous to enter an Ethiopian hamlet. Even though no messenger had gone ahead to announce our approach, the elder was apparently expecting us, and he received us hospitably—the Falasha grapevine had been at work. This time we were served roasted barley and freshly made coffee, black, and with salt, not sugar, dissolved in it, Ethiopian fashion.

Just outside the door of the hut where we sat, a huge clay pot was being built up, coil by coil, by an elderly woman. Although the wheel is not used in Ethiopian pottery-making, her finished product looked beautifully symmetrical. To shape it, she used a wet corn cob, and then smoothed down the wet, copper-colored surface with a piece of bamboo. After several days in the hot sun, the pots are piled one on top of another, dried cow dung is heaped around them, and they are fired.

Far enough from the huts to guard against the danger of flying sparks, a five-man team of Falasha ironsmiths was at work fashioning plow points. Just as at Wolleqa, the older men did the weaving, sitting on the ground with their legs in holes dug beneath their hand looms. Strings attached to their toes did the work of a treadle, opening a passage for the throwing of the shuttle.

Ayannew kept staring at the women's freshly shaven heads. His own Amhara women wore their hair either in a huge bushy crop anointed with butter, or had it plaited front to back in some ten to thirty braids. But Falasha law requires all women to shave their heads.

Descending into the valley on our departure, we encountered a Christian peasant whom we had met earlier in the day. He was leaving his plow overnight very near the Falasha fields, far from his own hill. Ayannew wondered aloud at this, but the peasant assured him that the Christians and the Falashas were all friends hereabouts and none would harm the other.

In a more distant mountainous area, called Tayber, lived one of the last surviving Falasha monks. The Falashas have had monks and nuns for many centuries, probably in imitation

of their Christian neighbors. Even more than the Falasha priests, the monks have insisted on strict observance of the old ways, and they strongly opposed Dr. Faitlovitch when he tried to introduce European Rabbinic Judaism in place of their Mosaic Judaism. They particularly objected to his condemnation of their animal sacrifices. The people considered the monks holier than the priests, for the celibates lived in a quarter apart from the general community and practiced *attenqunye* toward non-monastic Falashas as well as toward non-Falashas. Now there were only a half-dozen Falasha monks surviving in Ethiopia, all over eighty, and no new generation was rising to take their place. While still held in awe, they were no longer obeyed with the old fidelity.

A young Falasha priest guided me on the journey to the old monk. My conversation with this venerable man had to be conducted across a chest-high wooden barrier—even priests were not permitted beyond it. (Here the *mesgid* was partitioned by a six-foot wall so that the old monk could pray on holy days without physical contact with the other worshippers.) The elders and priests of this *mesgid*, who joined us, bowed deeply and shouted the usual greeting "*Selaam*," in Geez. They told the monk who I was and that I wanted to speak with him. The old man, who could no longer stand erect, hobbled closer and spoke out in the ancient Falasha language, Quarinya. The older priests translated this into Amharic, telling me that he was inquiring after the health of my father and other ancestors, in accordance with ancient formula. Answering my questions, he said that he was eighty-five years old and had been a monk for sixty-six years. He volunteered the statement that he had always been celibate.

After we left, the elders told me that I had received an unusually cordial reception from him. Once, at the time of the liberation of Ethiopia from the Italians, a Jewish officer in the British army had committed the unforgivable sin of riding into Tayber on a mule on Saturday, and the monk had refused to believe that he was an "Israelist."

AFTER my excursion to Tayber, I felt that the time had come to visit a region where the Falashas lived by themselves. The largest Falasha concentration seemed to be in a district called Wezaba, a chain of hamlets stretching across hill and dale which took two hours to traverse on muleback.

Again an accidental meeting eased my way. I had been waiting in Gondar one day with Ayannew for the mule driver, who was late in bringing up our animals for a trip to a Coptic country wedding, when I noticed nearby a dignified figure silently studying me. His *shamma* covered him from nose to hips, which indicated an attitude of reserve; from his tropical helmet, old and worn though it was, one could see that he enjoyed some kind of elevated status. I guessed, incorrectly, that he was a judge of the provincial court. After a bit, he approached hesitantly and greeted me in Amharic, introducing himself as the village teacher of Wezaba come to town to receive his monthly wages.

Since the Falashas of Wezaba enjoy communal autonomy, I was puzzled that he should be employed by the Ethiopian educational authorities to teach in a distant village area which was not part of a school district. He told me that he had succeeded in having a salary for himself included in the budget for the Muslim section of Gondar. He taught Amharic writing and arithmetic to the first grade at a salary less than half of what he would have received as a teacher in Gondar. But he preferred to live among his own people.

After telling me all this, he fell back into his former reserve; it was my impression that he did not wish my guide to hear anything more. Only later did he reveal to me, for example, that he spoke fluent Hebrew, which he had learned three decades before during a six years' residence in Palestine. When the day came to ride over the mountains to Wezaba, I found that he had arranged an escort of five Falasha peasants for me, despite the fact that this was the beginning of the second plowing season and every man was needed in the fields.

The teacher had been working as a clerk in the provincial administration of Ras Kassa when the Italians invaded Ethiopia in 1935-36. Tribal wars had broken out everywhere and some of the oldest Falasha villages were attacked. He had set out for these villages in the company of Ethiopia's foremost scholar (a Falasha who had been one of Dr. Faitlovitch's earliest students) in an attempt to persuade the Falashas to migrate to the Wezaba region, where the two men had already rented land. There the Falasha's would be concentrated, and safer than in their old scattered villages. They let themselves be persuaded and

made the trek to Wezaba, where in time they somehow managed to collect two hundred rifles and a store of ammunition, and were thus able to survive the uprisings that broke out again toward the end of the Italian occupation, in 1940-41.

CROSSING one rocky river bed after another, we at last reached the hilly Wezaba country, which had been all thorny bush until the Falashas cleared it with fire: now they use contour plowing to cultivate the hilly land. There were several brooks in the area—a feature very important to the Falashas, who are in the habit of washing daily. The paths around the hills were so steep that often a single misstep on the part of my mule could have sent me hurtling five hundred feet straight down.

As we approached the first settlement, we were joined by small groups of young Falashas armed with rifles. This was a great honor, since the Falashas as a rule carry their rifles only on special occasions like holy days, when they even bring the weapons into the *mesgid*. Being the skillful smiths they are, they had devised simple tools and molds to repair and recast every part of a rifle except the barrel, and they used cow's marrow as lubrication.

Ambo-Ber was the name of a central group of hamlets. To the north stretched the hills on which Woynige and "little Wezaba" sprawled; to the south was Seramle, where the local school was located. From Seramle the path led down to the plain of Dembea, where the Protestant missionaries had converted thousands of Falashas between 1860 and 1904. A malaria epidemic had wiped out whole villages in that area a month before I arrived. Though the epidemic never reached the Wezaba upland, some of the young Falashas who had gone to the lowland markets to sell plow points, *shammas*, and grain, and to buy salt, coffee, and raw cotton, had returned to their homes sick.

The main Wezaba synagogue was in Ambo-Ber, although each hamlet had one of its own. This central *mesgid*, a big round stone hut with a well-made thatched roof, stood isolated on the flat top of a low hill, where it could be seen from all sides. As I approached I could see a reception committee forming in front of it, with the priests—whom I identified by their white headgear and their chintz sun umbrellas—at the head. Then more men with rifles gathered around. Children formed a line on one side of the group, and on the other, slightly

to the rear, the women crowded together. I dismounted to walk the rest of the way up the hill, feeling that this would be a sign of respect.

Suddenly, the women set up a shrill shout, sounding like "Illillill," which I had previously heard only at Coptic festivals and on the approach of the Emperor. I shook hands with the priests, one of whom I recognized as the Falasha chief priest who had been present outside the church on the Coptic holy day in Gondar. The village teacher, who had lost his reserve, took me aside and, speaking in fluent Hebrew, advised me to tell Ayannew to sit under a tree. The menfolk wanted to speak to me in the *mesgid*, and as a Christian, Ayannew could not be admitted. The women could not enter either, unless very old.

Inside, they fired questions at me for three hours. How many years had it been since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem? How long was it since the creation of the world? When I told them that this was 5714 according to the Jewish calendar, they gleefully joked about the error of the Coptic priests, who calculated that the world was eight thousand years old. How many Jews were there in the world? How many in America?

The mention of millions brought exclamations of "Aiiyye." How many years since the new State of Israel had been created? Did "Jerusalem" have room for all the millions of Jews living elsewhere? Did Western Jews have priests? How did they choose their priests? (Falasha priests are elected, on the basis of learning, character, and family, but usually it is the son of a priest who is chosen.) How many Hebrew schools were there in America? Did I know Dvora? (I learned later that they were referring to the only Western Jewish woman who had ever visited the Falashas, Deborah Lifchitz of the University of Paris, who came to this province with a French research expedition in 1932 and who later perished in a Nazi concentration camp.) All my replies were immediately written down.

I was sitting on a typical Ethiopian chair made of strips of oxhide interlaced over a wooden frame. The others sat on the straw-covered ground. It surprised me that I was not asked to take my shoes off, as I had been in the Falasha *mesgid* in Sequelt, but I was told that these people had learned from the students of Dr. Faitlovitch that it was not necessary to request visitors to remove their shoes in the *mesgid*.

I began to realize at this point that whenever Falashas wanted to make some changes in a ritual they conveniently reminded themselves of what Dr. Faitlovitch had said or seemed to have said about it forty or fifty years before. Until a few years ago, for example, the paschal lamb had always been sacrificed during Passover. The Falashas abandoned this practice when they learned of the new State of Israel, after several years of debate during which Dr. Faitlovitch's past protests were frequently cited. Then the priests added a new law declaring that henceforth no meat at all was to be eaten during the Passover week, because "our Israelite forefathers had no meat in the desert."

This largest of Falasha communities was eager to accept change, but only through the established channels of priests, elders, and, lately, the village teacher. Discriminating changes approved by the accepted authorities not only did not weaken the community but made it stronger and better able to cope with new situations. On the other hand, there were many stories of serious dissension in the monk-ridden villages, where all change was resisted.

THE Falasha assistant of Rav Shmuel had already been here and had taken six twelve-year-old boys and several priests to Asmara. The rest of the quota had been filled by students selected from other areas. The priests were to return to the villages in time for Passover; the boys were to remain and continue their studies. "Whatever Rav Shmuel may teach us we shall do," declared the priests.

It seemed that nearly everyone had wanted to go to Asmara, especially the boys between twelve and twenty, but because his facilities and funds were limited, Rav Shmuel could take only a few. Some were so eager for an education that they had left on their own with the intention of walking the four hundred miles to their goal, despite the high mountain range they would have to cross on the way. The village teacher was worried lest these boys fall prey to Mr. Payne, an Anglican missionary whose station at Dabat was on the road to Asmara and who offered free food and free education. Earlier that day the priests had been joking about Mr. Payne, saying that his home office (the London Society for the Conversion of the Jews) would soon close his mission, since he had not won any new Falasha converts for a long time.

There were, in fact, two Christian missionaries operating in the area. Forbidden to make

converts of Copts, they had been sent several years before to resume the effort to convert the Falashas. The first to arrive was Payne, a slight and bespectacled Englishman. He was having very little success. His wife was a granddaughter of the well-known Martin Flad, who had been one of the successful Protestant missionaries in the area prior to the advent of Dr. Faitlovitch. Payne had finally converted one Falasha priest and had managed to round up a few boys, whom he was educating. But when the ex-priest tried to proselytize a Falasha village he was threatened with bodily harm. To make matters worse for Payne, nine of his Falasha boys then deserted him for the pleasanter accommodations and better educational opportunities of his competitor, one Mr. Bianas.

Bianas, chief of the Seventh Day Adventist Mission to the Falashas established at Debra Tabor east of Lake Tana, was a "working missionary." That is, he was less bent on quick results (i.e., immediate conversions) than on gradual and thorough spiritual transformation. Bianas was Norwegian, stocky and friendly, and had the further advantage over Payne of observing the Sabbath on Saturday, as did the Falashas. His mission offered free schooling up to the eighth grade, free medical care, and instruction in carpentry. But all Bianas got for his pains was a few of Payne's pupils who had tired of the eternal preaching. This did not make for friendly relations between the two missionaries, much to the amusement of the Falasha villagers, who knew of every development inside the mission compounds.

When the Falashas heard that I would soon be visiting Asmara, the families of the students began to write letters to them for me to deliver. The teacher begged me to ask Rav Shmuel to do something for the many disappointed boys who had been unable to go. Perhaps a larger school could be founded in Gondar which the Falasha peasants would be glad to supply with free food, native furniture, and cooks.

THAT evening I was the guest of the saddlemaker of "little Wezaba." Ayannew whispered to me that this saddlemaker was a "known man" even in Gondar, and that he could "talk well in court," which is the highest praise one Ethiopian can give another. As a sign of extraordinary hospitality, my host washed my feet. Then he sat down and announced formally, "Now let us make conversation."

Dusk was approaching, and through the open door I could see a lone woman in the empty, harvested cornfield making a fire and huddling close to it. Her menstrual week had just ended, my host told me, and having bathed and washed her clothing, she was now drying herself before returning to her husband. In the hut, other women, their heads freshly shaven, were cooking *shiro* (lentil pudding) in clay pots. One young mother of sixteen was nursing her two-year-old daughter at the far side of the hut, never taking her big, curious eyes off the white brother from across the sea.

The saddlemaker was more learned than some of the priests. I asked for his version of the Falasha calendar, on which I had been gathering data, and we talked about this. In return, he wanted me to help broaden his geography. When was America first settled by human beings? After a few cups of barley beer his questions became more personal. How is it that you don't smoke? Don't all foreigners smoke? The Italians smoked, and Dr. Faitlovitch had puffed endlessly. (Smoking is forbidden to the Ethiopian Christians, and the Falashas do not use tobacco either, though they have no prohibition against it.) How old are you? Why aren't you married? At what age do young men get married in America?

The next day the teacher showed me his school, a rectangular hut badly in need of a new thatched roof. But he did have a slate blackboard! There were sixty boys, from eight to twenty, and twenty girls (a very high percentage, the usual ratio of girls to boys in Ethiopian schools being one to ten) attending the first grade. On his own time he taught a few to read Hebrew, using three Hebrew textbooks that had been brought a few years before by an Israeli representative of the Brit Ivrit Olamit (World Congress for Hebrew).

On leaving Wezaba, I promised the villagers to bring replies from their sons and brothers in Asmara when I returned to spend Passover with them. In all, they had entrusted to me twenty-three private letters and six official ones. Of the former, two had been written by women to their sons. One said, "Why, my son, have you gone away and left me?" But the fathers urged their sons to study hard, and the brothers begged, "Pray for me, that I, too, shall receive an education"; "I am hungry for learning as for bread, and thirsty as for water"; "I am nineteen and my parents are talking of a wife for me, but I would rather die than not

get an education." The teacher wrote his twelve-year-old son, "Don't waste your time walking in the town. Your mother longs for you. But don't think of us. Study hard. Obey your teachers and learn Hebrew well. But don't forget your Amharic." To Rav Shmuel he wrote in Hebrew, "Two thousand years have gone, but now you have returned. Our hearts are glad that you have come to teach us. We want to learn *Ivrit*, the language of our ancient forefathers."

Before leaving for Asmara, I paid another visit to Abba Antonyos. In the afternoon, a beak-nosed, bearded figure rushed up to me all out of breath. He had a letter for Rav Shmuel and was afraid that I might leave before he could give it to me. He was one of five Yemenite Jewish shoemakers living in Gondar. Four of them had still been young men when they came to Gondar, during the Italian occupation. The Italians had needed shoemakers badly, and the Yemenites had prospered, bought houses, and married Falasha girls. They all had large families now, but since extremely few Ethiopians in Gondar wear shoes, they had become very poor.

The shoemaker told me that he had received a letter from relatives in Israel who had emigrated there from Yemen on the "magic carpet," and that he and the other Yemenites were most eager to go to Israel; would I please ask Rav Shmuel to help them? His Falasha mother-in-law, who lived in Abba Antonyos, saw him show me the letter from Israel. She promptly began to upbraid him in Amharic, accusing him of wanting to abandon his wife and children and go off to Israel alone. But it was clear that her rage was artificial and intended to be "preventive." He pacified her by kissing her on the cheek. I learned that all of the Falashas hoped some day to return to sacred "Jerusalem," which they thought of as their ancestral home. But there was no immediate plan.

ASMARA presented a complete contrast to all the other places I had seen in Ethiopia: neat little villas surrounded by bougainvillea; spotless asphalted streets which were swept every day; schoolboys in starched Fauntleroy suits; modern European drugstores.

As I entered Rav Shmuel's rented house, a tall Falasha wearing European dress and a small goatee greeted me. He was the German-educated student of Dr. Faitlovitch, Rav Shmuel's assistant. In a moment we were talk-

ing about his student days in Frankfurt-on-the-Main.

Rav Shmuel compared notes with me. He had gathered information about Falasha religious laws from the priests, and was preparing a report to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel on questions of Halachah. He had already concluded that he could recognize a Falasha marriage as valid, but not the easy divorce. He admired the maintenance of ancient Jewish menstrual laws for the women and the observance of the Sabbath and major Jewish holy days (though the dates did not always coincide with Rabbinic ones). Although the Falasha priests were elected and not necessarily the sons of priests, he felt that it was all right for them to be called up as *kohanim* during the reading of the Torah on *Shabbat*.

Several days later, I talked with a most unusual personality, a Falasha scholar who combined a mastery of Geez literature with a well-rounded European education. He was the oldest surviving student of Dr. Faitlovitch. He had served the Ethiopian government in diplomatic and ministerial posts, and had worked hard for the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia, which had finally been accomplished by the United Nations in 1952. Pensioned off as an ex-minister, he was now writing a history of Ethiopia. We discussed many aspects of modern Ethiopia and the problems of the Falashas. He thought a mass emigration of the Falashas to Israel would not be in their own interest without prior modern education. If the Jews of the world really wanted to do something constructive to help the Falashas, he felt, they should build schools in Ethiopia, equip them, and staff them with teachers.

In Asmara I attended a Bar Mitzvah celebration of Adenite Jews. To my amazement, a half dozen men performed the same rhythmic to-and-fro dance that I had seen in the Coptic Ethiopian monastery of Debra Libanos (and that I was soon to see among the Falashas). The Adenites were chanting the hymns composed by Sholom Shabazi in Yemen about three hundred years ago.

While in Asmara I also went to see the famous "Incode" kosher meat-packing plant, built in the last few years for the slaughtering and canning of Ethiopian beef bought for Israel. Some of the cattle came from as far away as Gondar, and twice during the dry season herds of hundreds of animals made the long trek to Asmara.

BACK in Gondar, a large carton of matzoh, sent by my sister from America, was waiting for me. I planned to share it, and also the bottles of Israeli wine I had obtained in Asmara, with the Falashas of Wezaba on Passover, which was about to begin. The teacher, whom I had told of the matzoh, had sent an extra donkey to carry the package. A mare, she was accompanied by a foal almost as big as herself—because “they would feel lonely apart from each other.” And so we were a small caravan starting out before sunrise. But to save the Falashas embarrassment during the Passover celebrations, I was riding without Ayannew.

As we climbed eastward under a clear blue sky, a flock of puffy white clouds began to move across the horizon from the direction of the Indian Ocean. This meant that it would rain that afternoon, that the season of “little rains” had begun. The peasants were taking their plows out to the fields. The sun-baked, rock-hard ground would soften, and the plow point would be able to make some headway. Wearing stiff capes made of yellow papyrus reeds, the farmers would scatter seed for their second annual crop.

The Falashas, when I arrived, were thrilled with the American matzoh and the wine. They called the former, “*Iyarussalyem qitta*” (unleavened bread from Jerusalem), and the teacher undertook its distribution. Two packages were set aside for the visitors who would come during the week from the outlying districts. They would eat some matzoh here, and then take samples home.

My hosts were also pleased with the photos I had taken of them and had developed in Asmara, and I gave them a print of each. We sat down for the last pre-Passover dinner (which happened to fall that year on a Friday night); this was to be the last meat we would eat for a week. The women brought clay pans full of pungent, steaming, peppered meat stew. The last *injära* (leavened, limp bread) was dipped by hand into the sauce, and lifted out with a morsel of meat. (The Falashas never eat the raw beef which is a feature of all Coptic feasts, and consequently suffer much less from tapeworm.)

Dusk approached quickly, and all food and utensils were removed. My tent was pitched. The priests and menfolk entered the *mesgid*. I had brought candles, and all were pleased to have the extra light to add to the single oil

can they normally used. The chief priest had brought his personal copy of the *Orit*, made of parchment and sewn into the shape of a book.

In Ethiopia, because of its nearness to the equator, sunset comes at about 6 P.M. all the year round. It was seven when the service began: chanting to the sound of the drums and the tinkling of the *sistrum*. Again and again the priests formed two rows of chanters, joined by a few elders with good voices, and gracefully and slowly danced toward each other and then away. Among the musical instruments was one I had not seen before: a round, flat iron disk suspended from a string held by a single finger. It was struck with an iron spike to keep time to the beat of the drum, the chants, and the steps, and it gave off a gong-like sound. I learned that it had been invented by the Falashas in the course of their work as ironsmiths.

Soon all the dancers formed a circle, shoulder to shoulder, this time moving in the same direction with faces turned inward. I joined them, and they smiled and nodded to me. Coming out of a slight crouch, the dancers made short bows with their shoulders, then settled back, directed their eyes to the ceiling, and resumed their chanting, their ecstatic faces appealing to heaven. The little bow was timed to the drumbeat, *sistrum*, and gong. The sidestep was a slow shuffle resembling an American Indian dance. The drums were four feet long, wooden frames over which oxhide had been stretched, and wider at one end than the other. They were suspended from a rope slung across the shoulder, and since they were very heavy, the priests would take turns, solicitously shifting them from one person to another, always without missing a beat.

By eight-thirty the services were over, and we adjourned to the open meadow under a clear sky and a full moon. Scattered lights, coming from hearths inside the huts on the surrounding hills, were visible—for while the Falashas do not make fire on the Sabbath, they kindle a big fire late Friday afternoon that lasts long into the night. Around the huts, donkeys and mules were tethered inside hedges of thornbush to protect them from prowling hyenas.

While the women in the hamlets below the *mesgid* were bringing the unleavened bread, each of the men received a piece of matzoh and a little wine. They had long ago lost the

art of wine-making and, because of the reference to "drinking the blood of Jesus" in the Christian Eucharist, they suspected that the wine used by the Christian Copts in Communion might be blood. Apart from the village teacher, who had been abroad, none had ever tasted grape wine before. They permitted themselves to drink it now because the teacher, who knew Hebrew, had identified the seal and label as "Iyarussalyem" wine and because I, whom they trusted, had brought it. Murmurs of "Iyarussalyem woyn" passed through the ranks. Some asked for an extra piece of matzoh to bring to their wives.

The priests then asked me to show them how Passover was celebrated in my country. I recited the blessing over the matzoh in Hebrew and chanted from memory portions of the Haggadah, beginning with "Slaves we were to Pharaoh in Egypt." The teacher gave them a running translation from Hebrew into Amharic, and for his benefit I had to be careful to use the Sephardic pronunciation, to which he was accustomed. The priests blessed me when I concluded, saying, "Today light has begun, now that we have eaten *massa*. May the Lord return you safely to your father and mother."

The empty wine bottle went from hand to hand, and the moonlight was so bright that one *däbtära* (learned scribe) was able to make out the identity of the two men depicted on the label carrying heavy fruit hung from a pole on their shoulders. "That is Joshua and Caleb, carrying the fruit to *Musse* [Moses]!" he exclaimed. There was great excitement and much pushing as everyone tried to look at the marvelous illustration of what they had heard recited in the *Orit*. The bottle and the cover of a package of matzoh were later placed on permanent exhibit in the *mesgid*.

Conversation continued in subdued tones. Some of the men who had not seen each other for a long time had much news to relate. There was a hush over the landscape. Tired from the long mule ride, I was glad to call it a day. As I crawled into my tent, a mouse scurried past me. My air mattress was completely flat. The nasty thing had eaten two holes into the rubber.

IT WAS still dark at 5 A.M., when the chanting of the morning service awakened me. There were eight men participating this time, and soon the eighty-two-year-old mother of the chief priest joined in. Because of her son and

her age, she was the only woman admitted to the *mesgid*, but she had to remain at the west door near the wall. She was praying silently, her half-blind eyes almost closed, her hands raised in supplication, palms up. But she performed more than thirty prostrations along with the priests, repeating the words, "Hear me, hear me."

There was much responsive recitation and singing. Sometimes one priest motioned to another to take over. They all knew the words of the singing, which lasted for hours, by heart. All leaned on their *maqomyas*, bamboo crutches, since no one is allowed to sit during worship. Now the chief priest took the *Orit* from the niche in the wall in which he had placed it the night before and unwrapped its flowery silk scarf. The women outside set up their shrill shout of joy, "Illillill." The priest read the portion of the Exodus to the assembled congregation. By seven-thirty the sun was already high, and the day was growing warm when the priests bowed three times to the east, saying, "Abraham Amlak, Isshaq Amlak, Ya'qob Amlak [God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob]." This signified the end of the service.

Afterward the men sat on the floor of the *mesgid* while the women brought water to wash their hands, and layers of *qitta* to eat. These were cut and broken in such a way that the center square, the piece of honor, could be blessed by the priest. I distributed raisins (obtained from an Arab shop in Gondar), and the women brought me a big pot of milk. They stood around studying me, and I studied them. One had a beaded ribbon across her forehead, which I discovered was a special amulet that she wore because several of her babies had been still-born. One of the girls was the thirteen-year-old boyish-looking daughter of a priest. She was soon to be married.

The *mesgid* lay near the path from Gondar, and a Coptic priest, passing by, peered in and looked at me with surprise. He exchanged a few words with a Falasha priest, then walked away. The village teacher was pleased by this incident. It is good, he said, for the peasants to see that Europeans are not afraid to visit the Falashas. (White persons are called Europeans in Africa.) This would help reduce the superstitions about the Falashas, he felt—especially the belief that they could turn themselves into hyenas.

At 10 A.M., boys ranging in age from seven to fifteen formed two teams on the meadow to

play the Ethiopian game of *kwas*. This is similar to soccer except that the goalee may only stop the ball with his hips. The teacher explained that in the past playing would have been forbidden on the Sabbath. I walked with him across the flat hilltop, amid grazing cows, patient bulls, sheep, goats, and donkeys. He showed me where holes had been dug for the posts of the new schoolhouse to be erected when the first graduates returned from Rav Shmuel's school.

When Rav Shmuel's Falasha assistant had been here last, he had left a blank notebook behind. The teen-age boys playing *kwas* stopped me to ask my opinion of the lady whose picture appeared on the title page. It was Esther Williams in a bathing suit. They wanted to know whether that woman was crazy for exposing herself.

An argument was going on between two priests who had just returned from the brief course in Asmara and the other priests. The two felt that the building of the new schoolhouse should be stopped during the week of Passover. But the others thought that since no one would be farming, pottery-making, smithing or weaving, it was a good opportunity to put hundreds of stout hands to work on this community project. Rav Shmuel's two disciples were adamant, however, and the project was abandoned.

AFTER services that evening visitors began to come and go, now that the Sabbath was over. When we had eaten, the teacher and I went for another long walk, during which I heard his life history. He was born about 1900 in the village of Amba Gualit. When he was twenty years old, he appealed for an education to Getie Jeremias, an early student of Dr. Faitlovitch who came from the same area as he did, and who was then in Asmara. (Getie died many years ago.) But at twenty, the future teacher was too old to be admitted to the school. Dr. Faitlovitch, however, did arrange to have him trained in carpentry, and he studied Italian and arithmetic on his own. For years he persisted in seeking an education, and finally in 1924 he was sent to Palestine, where he learned Hebrew at the school sponsored by the Alliance Israélite Universelle. The director of the school, a German Jew named Goldschmidt, also taught him German calisthenics, in which he was now instructing his Falasha boys. He promised to put them

through their paces for me the next day. In 1929 he had gone to Paris but had been forced to leave after a year because of the depression. He spoke nostalgically of that year in France.

After returning to Asmara, he grew homesick for Gondar and soon made his way back there. The governor, Ras Kassa, was glad to have him work as a clerk in the municipality, a post he retained during the early stages of the Italian occupation, in 1936, when the Italians were encouraging every kind of tribal expression. They even gave him a modest title in the Ethiopian nobility, and appointed him head of all the Falashas. Nevertheless, he had not trusted the Italians, who wanted the Falashas to come to Gondar to work for them as mechanics. Able to read Italian, he followed the events in Europe through newspapers, and anticipated trouble. So he used his position as head of the Falashas to plan the evacuation of the Falasha villages and the creation of this new and largest Falasha community in what had once been a mountainous wilderness. In 1940, when Mussolini finally joined Hitler, orders came from Rome to "suppress" the Falashas. He told me that the Fascists had even dropped leaflets in Amharic from planes, spreading the old superstition that the Falashas were hyenas.

His Coptic friends had warned him at one time during the occupation that he and the Falasha priests and elders were to be lured into a trap. He avoided it and organized the defense of the Wezaba region. In 1941, Ethiopia was liberated. A British commander in the area sent two Palestinian Jewish medical officers to offer him a job as interpreter at the former Italian hospital in Gondar. He accepted this post, and later a number of other Ethiopian government posts in Gondar, first as clerk, then as teacher in the hinterland. By that time, however, he had married and was tired of wandering. In 1947, he decided to start the village school where he was now teaching, and he had been living in a mud hut in the village ever since. He told me that he was the only one of Dr. Faitlovitch's students who was working closely with the people. The others, after tasting Western comforts, found the primitive life too hard. An hour later, when he had reached his hut, he pulled a sheepskin over his sleeping nine-year-old son, then stretched his cowskin over some wooden boards in front of my tent, wrapped himself in his *shamma*, and curled up to sleep, in ac-

cordance with the rules of Ethiopian hospitality.

Services started just as early the next morning, but were briefer, because that day was considered only a semi-holiday (like *chol ha-moed*). Afterward, the teacher lined his boys up for the calisthenics demonstration. They stood at attention as he barked orders in Amharic, and for over two hours did strenuous exercises, the amulets round their necks swinging to and fro. He rarely gave them a minute's breather, but they seemed to enjoy the test.

In the afternoon the five priests gathered to hold court. All quarrels had to be settled there, and anyone referring a grievance to an outside court was liable to expulsion from the community. In one case that day, a young weaver was accused of neglecting his wife, neither clothing nor feeding her properly, and of going about idle. The woman was not called, but her kinsmen spoke for her. She had cooked and baked for her husband, carried wood and water from the valley, spun cotton, and borne him a son now eighteen months old. His excuse was that he had caught malaria and was convalescing. After a hearing of three hours, during which many witnesses spoke, the court found him guilty. His sentence was to weave his wife a fine new *shamma* as well as a new cotton dress, to buy her a necklace of imported glass beads at the market in Gondar, and to post a bond against future misbehavior. There were no court fees.

That evening the elders again had many questions for me: How long had there been Jews living in America? How many synagogues were there? How were they built? Was it now day or night in Jerusalem? In America? Was it true that the law forbade whites and blacks in America to intermarry? Had America one or many governments? Was the country as big as Ethiopia? Could automobiles go through the hot desert without being burnt? Were there two suns or only one for the whole earth?

I SPENT the week making a demographic survey, gathering statistics on occupations, education, land tenure, and agriculture. On

the basis of my hut-count of the entire Wezaba "range," I concluded that a little over 1,000 persons inhabited this complex of Falasha hamlets. The constant stream of visitors, many of them priests and elders, from other districts helped me to arrive at an estimate of Ethiopia's total Falasha population, including the distant district of Quara and the sub-province of Semien, as somewhere between 20,000 and 25,000. This was somewhat surprising; I had expected a larger figure.

The morning of my departure, the community council came to me with a farewell request. Would I please introduce some of the ailing villagers to the new doctors at the Gondar hospital, one of whom, they had heard, was an "Israelist"? They were afraid of the "dressers" (male nurses), and would have confidence in the hospital only after a personal introduction. Forthwith they lined up fourteen ailing persons of both sexes. I promised to do what I could. The priests and elders clasped my hand in both palms, the Ethiopian gesture of deep gratitude. After waving farewell to the women and patting the heads of the children, I rode away with the teacher and the patients.

Months later, as I prepared to leave Ethiopia, I reflected on these high points among my experiences: the young law student in the plane en route to the mud huts of Gondar, carrying his copy of Kant; the elder of Wolleqa who had forgotten the Falasha calendar, but whose womenfolk still used the menstrual hut; the crippled, Quarinya-speaking ancient monk of Tayber, arch representative of *attenqunye*. But the most vibrant memory was that of the village teacher on the Wezaba range, through whom the Falashas may be able to make their transition to the modern world with a minimum of disturbance.

Postscript: Since this was written, the first Falasha teen-age graduates of the school in Asmara have arrived in Israel. After three years of general and vocational schooling at the children's village of Kfar Batya, they will return home to Ethiopia to serve as teachers of their people.